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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN POLITICS #27: THE DOMINICAN CATHOLIC CHURCH - AVUNCULAR, ACTIVIST AND TRUSTED

11. (SBU) The following is number 27 in our series on the first year of Leonel Fernandez's administration.

The Dominican Catholic Church - Avuncular, Activist, and Trusted

Like many countries in Latin America, the Dominican Republic has a nominally Roman Catholic majority. For 500 years the Dominican Catholic Church has not only been the preeminent religious institution, but has also wielded significant political influence. This dual role continues today, despite inroads by other denominations in Dominicans, religious preferences. Through a handful of prominent players, the Catholic Church makes itself heard on general principles but rarely prescribes specific remedies or rebukes individuals in public. Its presence is felt in a wide array of social and political domains.

A Catholic Overview

A 1997 survey found that 68 percent of Dominicans were Catholic, but the Catholic Church sets the figure at 87 percent. In opinion polls, the Church consistently outranks other national institutions as having the confidence and trust of the people. Last year, the Church scored 71 percent, the banks 41 percent, the armed forces 40 percent, the President 37 percent, the police 37 percent, the judiciary 32 percent, Congress 24 percent, and political parties 18 percent. Dominican Catholic clergy cite these figures with satisfaction.

There is no state religion in the Dominican Republic. The Trujillo dictatorship signed a Concordat with the Holy See in 1954, a bilateral that gave the Catholic Church the right to impart religious instruction in public schools, government funding for building and repairing church facilities, and a waiver of customs duties for importation of goods. The Concordat provides general clerical immunity from arrest, detention and prosecution, but allows the state to treat cases on their individual merits. The Papal Nuncio -- the Vatican's ambassador to the Dominican Republic -- serves as the dean of the diplomatic corps. The current Nuncio is U.S. citizen Timothy Broglio, who has been resident in Santo Domingo for four years.

Catholic priests are the only clergy recognized by the state as empowered to perform marriages. In popular barrios, many believe that marriage under another religious regime will lead to automatic excommunication, and in many cases unions remain of the common law variety. In early 2005 the Dominican Congress passed legislation to recognize marriages performed by other denominations, but to date no implementing regulations have been prepared.

Dominican practice is "Caribbean Catholicism," as the Nuncio commented to us with a smile. Dominicans are not particularly ardent churchgoers, and their period of Carnival is not limited to "mardi gras" but rather extends systematically throughout the period of Lent, taking the form of municipal celebrations staged on weekends by different towns, up to the last weekend before Easter.

Prominent Representatives

Catholic clergy from all over the country regularly make the daily news voicing opinions about politics, society, and -- yes -- theological issues. Cardinal Nicolas de Jesus Lopez Rodriguez, 69 years old, is the most regularly cited leader of the church hierarchy. Ordained in 1961, he was appointed cardinal 30 years later, in 1991. Lopez Rodriguez is known for his conservative views and regular commentary -- and occasional outbursts -- on political affairs. In his recent homilies and comments to journalists he has condemned corruption, political scandals, the judicial system's inefficacy, drug trafficking, and prison conditions. For a time the Dominican media bruited Cardinal Lopez Rodriguez as a possible candidate for the papal succession. He had expressed the hope that a Latin American cardinal might be chosen, pointing out that nearly half of the world's Catholics live in Latin America.

The country's leading private university, Pontificia Universidad Catolica Madre y Maestra (Pontifical Catholic University, Mother and Teacher, usually known as PUCMM), was established in Santiago -- the nation's second largest city -- and has another campus in Santo Domingo. Monsignor Agripino Nunez, rector of this institution since 1970, is heavily involved in mediating political affairs. For every national election in the past 20 years, Msgr Nunez has presided a monitoring committee of civil society notables to guarantee the fairness of the electoral process. He chaired such a committee for the 2003-2004 presidential campaign, amid fears and rumors of electoral fraud, and appeared on television on election night alongside prominent foreign ambassadors to admonish vote counters to deliver rapid, accurate results. In April Msgr Nunez brought together Health Minister Sabino Baez with the long-aggrieved, repeatedly striking representatives of government-employed physicians and wrested an agreement to double salaries -- in 2006. Nunez's role is so significant (and predictable) in Dominican politics that when Fernandez decided to establish an Economic and Social Council to advise the administration, the first intention was to appoint Nunez to head it, with the rank, privileges and pay of a minister. This was not acceptable under canon law, so the council was structured to include a representative elected by the rectors of Dominican universities -- Nunez was chosen by fellow rectors and then he was voted by other members of the Economic and Social Council to preside.

The Council of Bishops (Conferencia del Episcopado Dominicano) publishes two pastoral letters annually, addressing a social or political issue and representing the collective voice of the Catholic hierarchy. For a number of years the initial draft has been furnished by retired bishop Jose Arnaiz, of Spanish nationality. The Council is headed by Archbishop of Santiago Ramon Benito Rosa y Carpio. During recent years of economic crisis the Council has occasionally issued special letters. These pastoral letters are formal expressions of the Church's views on current events and carry significant weight with the people. They are published but generally not read out from the pulpit. One key event in the repudiation of the Trujillo dictatorship was the publication of a pastoral letter in January, 1960, sharply critical of Trujillo; on the 44th anniversary of Trujillo's assassination, May 30 of this year, the Archbishop accepted from the "Foundation of the Heroes of May 30" their annual "Freedom Award" for the bishops' role in undermining Trujillo's authority.

President Fernandez generally limits his interaction with the Catholic Church hierarchy to protocol events, such as attendance at masses on major national holidays. Some political observers see Fernandez as essentially secular and uncomfortable with the Church. There was adverse reaction in the press when the President chose not to attend the funeral of Pope John Paul II, sending instead his wife Margarita Cedeño de Fernandez. Fernandez did travel to Rome for the consecration of Pope Benedict XVI.

The Activists

Many Dominican priests are deeply involved in community work.

For example, Father Christopher Hartley, a Spanish/British priest who took leave from St Patrick's cathedral in New York in 1996 and has remained here since then, has devoted a great amount of time working with communities in the sugar cane fields called "bateyes." He publicly criticizes working conditions and the practices of the authorities and plantation owners. In late 2004 he was assigned police protection after threats were made against him. Fr Hartley has served as the focus for exposes of batey conditions done by the Miami-based New Herald and Miami Herald and by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Father Rogelio Cruz, an activist in the region of Nagua, on the northern coast, was received privately by President Fernandez during a February visit to the region. Father Luis Rosario, National Coordinator of Youth Pastors, organizes programs for youth and speaks out about juvenile delinquency, drug-related gangs and other issues. A Belgian priest serves as community spokesperson for the border area of Jimani, in the south, and the Bishop of the northern town of Mao has spoken out in recent days to protest the expulsions of Haitians around the northern border post of Dajabon. Fr Regino Martinez runs the Jesuit Service for Refugees and Migrants at Dajabon and was a prominent critic of recent roundups of Haitians for expulsion.

Father Jorge Cela has specialized in NGO work and is currently affiliated with "Fe y Alegria," a local NGO. Father Cela in a recent meeting with us argued that the roles of the Church are as a mediator for society and politics, and as a defender of the poor. Once the Church steps out of these two roles, it loses credibility, in his judgment. In comments that echoed those made to us by Nuncio Fr Broglio, Cela noted

that most clergy and church-affiliated institutions do not speak out publicly, but their work benefits the society at least as much as the public pronouncements of the church hierarchy.

Above the Fray, Not Willing to Point the Finger

In summary, the Catholic Church plays the role of active observer and commentator for the Dominican Republic. Its messages are predictable, moralistic, and often discounted. It is very rare for a church leader to single out by name any individual. Monsignor Agripino Nunez, known more for secular than for religious accomplishments, epitomizes the Church's role as a helpful mediator expressing concern about the moral challenges to democratic government and politics. Corruption has rarely touched the church, a notable distinction in a country in which influence peddling and graft have long characterized both public and private sectors. Ordinary Dominicans have little belief in the functioning of most other institutions, but many still turn to the Catholic Church to mediate and to articulate their needs.

12. (U) Research and drafting by Sheena Stevens.

13. (U) This piece and others may be consulted on our SIPRNET site, <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo> along with extensive other material.
Hertell